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ABSTRACT

Service learning links community service and volunteerism with academic learning. It is a collaborative effort that brings schools, community-based organizations, parents, and other community members together in a common enterprise of individual and community growth. Service learning is based on a number of existing links between schools and communities and can be traced to at least three sources: John Dewey, experiential learning, and citizenship education. Three concepts are important to enriching the relationship between curriculum and service. First, an organization's commitment to service learning is essential to linking service to the curriculum. Second, service learning is different at each level of education. Third, there must be a continuum of curriculum and service integration. The most effective service learning coordinators are flexible facilitators of change. They work to make service learning a core value in their organization, provide meaningful training for adult participants, create a service learning communication network, support teachers, and create an environment where students are equal partners. Effective collaborations have the following characteristics: strike a balance between partners, are ongoing, prepare participants for service, provide for clear and frequent communication, are supported by a strong advisory board, and focus on sharing. Service learning displays adaptability, durability, and flexibility. It can be recommended as a model of school change and teacher training. (YLB)

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THE ESSENTIALS OF SERVICE LEARNING

February 1996

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The Pennsylvania Service Learning Evaluation Network

The Pennsylvania Service Learning Evaluation Network based at the University of Pittsburgh supports service learning programs. The network provides programs with information, support, resources, and guidance. The goal of the network is to help schools and community-based organizations evaluate their service learning programs.

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WHAT IS SERVICE LEARNING?

Service learning can be defined as an instructional methodology that facilitates the involvement of children and adolescents in real-life settings where they can apply academic knowledge and previous experience to meet real community needs. The service learning process involves preparation, service activity, reflection, and celebration. Although it is related to both community service and volunteerism, with which schools have long been involved, service learning is unique in that it links community service and volunteerism with academic learning. This means that it is not an add-on to existing programs within a school, but instead is integrated into the school's curriculum. Service is a learning activity. It is also a collaborative effort that brings schools, community-based organizations, parents, and other community members together in a common enterprise of individual and community growth.

Service learning is not a new concept. It is based on a number of existing links between schools and communities and can be traced to at least three sources: John Dewey, experiential education, and citizenship education. John Dewey believed that young people need to confront and gain control over their environment, and that in confronting this environment, they run into problems. In dealing with social problems, Dewey said, young people put their intelligence and past experience into use. The focus of experiential education, similarly, is learning by doing. Learning by experience encourages reflection on the process itself. Citizenship education promotes participation in a democracy. Community service and volunteerism are essential components of citizenship education.

Learning through service does not just happen; it is a process. There are many ways in which service learning can begin. It can start in the community or in the school, with a club, a special event, or a single teacher who uses a service activity to teach a unit. It is not a fixed concept that can be implemented in only one way. Rather, it is an evolving concept that has many possibilities. Often, it is focused on high school students. But service learning can benefit all types of students at every age level. Such comprehensive application has been recognized in recent years, as service learning programs have expanded and become more diverse.

There are a number of ways service learning can be established. However, two goals must be reached before a successful service learning project can be implemented: those involved must aim to create a local community that views the school as a potential resource to assess and address the needs of that community, and a school's vision must be shaped so that it perceives service as a way to give students a well-rounded education. When both views are in place, there is no limit to the possible gains that might emerge from service learning.

CURRICULUM AND SERVICE

For most schools and CBOs in the early years of service learning integration, the task was clearly to figure out what it meant to link service and learning, and from there decide exactly how to accomplish the task. Many of the early organizations involved had long traditions of community service, but actually linking this service to learning and education was another matter entirely. For the vast majority of schools and organizations, much time was spent discussing where and how service might be incorporated into the life of the school and into the school curriculum. Most people at this stage talked about volunteer activities and community service, but never spoke of service learning. Only a few coordinators were able to articulate exactly what service learning was and where it was taking place in their school.

Enriching the Relationship Between the Curriculum and Service: Three Lessons

What becomes clear when working in this area for any period of time is that shaping service to fit a curriculum is not as simple as just matching students to a task. Teachers, administrators, board members, parents, students, and community members alike wonder how to accomplish what can often seem an overwhelming and even daunting task. There are three important lessons related to curriculum and service that can help provide answers to commonly asked questions.

Organizational Commitment. An organization's commitment to service learning is key to linking service to the curriculum. Organizational commitment in early years was defined as the tangible and spirited guidance, reinforcement, assistance, and support provided to a service learning program by an organization. This commitment supported teachers and CBO staff to explore opportunities and face the risks associated with trying to implement a new program. More recently, however, three levels of commitment have emerged, each with specific indicators that help to assess organizational commitment. One level is critical mass: the sheer number of teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community-based organization staff working to link service and learning. The second level is measured by the generous and judicious allocation of materials, resources, funding, in-service training, and release time provided by the organization. The third level is judged by whether the organization has created a mission statement that focuses on linking learning and service and adopting educational practices that complement service learning (such as block scheduling and teaming).

Service Learning Variety. Service learning is different at each level of education: elementary, middle, and high school. Because of their structure, it is easiest to link learning and service in elementary schools. The one

class/one teacher aspect of elementary schools allows a teacher to develop learning objectives around a service project that integrates all academic areas, and also allows for more flexible scheduling. This structure makes grade-wide and school-wide programming less complicated than it can be at the secondary level. The higher level of parental involvement at the elementary level makes excursions off school grounds more manageable for the teacher, and since there are usually fewer clubs and extracurricular activities in elementary schools, most service takes place during the school day.

Recent changes at the middle school level are making it increasingly easier to link learning and service at this level as well. Many middle schools have started to have teacher teams, joint thematic planning, student-centered curricula, and block scheduling in order to better meet the changing needs of the early adolescent. Also, the characteristics of early adolescence naturally lend themselves to service learning. During this stage of early adolescent development, youth are more interested in social interactions than in academics. Service learning involves just such interaction with others; it provides opportunities for students to work with individuals and groups. In other words, it addresses their developmental *and* academic needs.

High school is where most school districts start their service learning initiatives. In many schools, the link between the curriculum and service is weak, with most service taking place outside of the academic classroom. Coordinating disciplinary themes and school-wide themes is difficult at the high school level, since teachers have time constraints and multiple classes. However, the use of intensive scheduling creates more opportunities for integration of service into a school's subject areas.

Continuum of Curriculum and Service Integration. The concept of a continuum of curriculum and service integration is popular among service learning theorists. A continuum range of school service that starts with a club and eventually expands into a school-wide theme is shown in Figure 2. The movement from one to the other creates a low integration - high integration span undergirding the continuum. The more service that is integrated into the curriculum, the more likely it is that "service learning" will take place, rather than "community service." In theory, schools progress from one point on the continuum to the next, and increase service integration at each point.

Figure 2. School Service Continuum: Links to the Curriculum

School Club or Organization	Extra Credit	Special Events	Community Service Classes	Outgrowth of existing Curriculum	Coordinating Disciplinary Theme	School-Wide
<<< Lower integration _____ Higher integration >>>						

SERVICE LEARNING COORDINATORS

Describing a coordinator is a task in and of itself. The most effective coordinators are flexible and can see slightly ahead of the rest. They function as service learning advocates and champions. They are facilitators of change who set the stage so that others can take meaningful roles in the process of linking service and learning. They face the challenge of building interest and support for service and learning. Service learning coordinators come in all forms, but what they share is a commitment to the idea that students can learn by contributing to their communities. They help make the walls of schools more permeable to allow the community to move in, and the school to expand out.

A coordinator can be a teacher, a principal, a district administrator, a CBO staff member, or a community member. Their responsibilities might include writing proposals, designing a program, preparing reports, managing the program on a daily basis, recruiting interested teachers, keeping everybody informed, writing service learning curricula, organizing celebrations, arranging transportation for projects, giving workshop presentations, ordering materials, tracking hours, and building bridges between the school and the community. In some programs, coordinators are responsible for all of the above, while in other programs responsibilities might be shared among several people.

Although there are many different types of coordinators, one thing they have in common is that they are facilitators of change. Coordinators assess the service learning programming available and decide how best to link service and learning based on the resources at hand. They then must create an environment that is conducive to change. There are a number of effective practices that coordinators use to link service and lear ng.

Coordinators work to make service learning a core value in their organization. They strive to place it high on the agenda of those who make decisions: principals, superintendents, agency directors, and the boards of directors for agencies and schools. This is formally accomplished when service learning becomes part of an organization's mission statement or strategic plan. Coordinators must also keep accurate records. Documentation and record keeping are often seen as a hassle, and therefore are frequently placed last on a long list of priorities. Putting documentation at the bottom of the list, however, will undermine its effectiveness, because there will not be critical data available to support the achievement of the program. Effective coordinators maintain forms, letters, and memos, which serve to organize information so that it can be easily accessible to research and reuse later.

Coordinators provide meaningful training for adult participants. Staff members cannot help to integrate service into the curriculum if they don't

understand the process involved. Similarly, as a program grows and changes, its training needs also change. Coordinators from other programs are often the best source of training and information. Their knowledge is usually current, and often helps to connect many separate pieces into a coherent whole. Coordinators must also plan with "Murphy's Law" in mind: "If anything can go wrong, it will . . . at the worst possible moment." They should know the school's calendar, timelines, deadlines, and test times. This information is crucial when outside organizations are working within a school, because all organizations operate on different schedules and have different priorities. Including CBOs and activity sites in the service learning planning process eliminates many potential conflicts, and allows for frank discussion of the benefits and risks of participation.

Effective coordinators create a service learning communication network. They understand the communication system, official and unofficial, in the organization they are working with, and learn to adapt to it. They connect with people to promote service learning, and know who to get the word out to. It is also important for coordinators to make connections with the people who makes things happen in an organization. Although the administration and the school board are the formal decision-makers when it comes to schools, often there are other key people -- parents, teachers, or community members -- who influence the decision-makers. These connections provide a better understanding of and appreciation for the benefits of service learning.

Coordinators support teachers as they embrace service learning as a teaching method. Putting the word out to all teachers or staff members is a good way to begin integrating service learning into an organization. One of the most beneficial things a coordinator can do is help teachers and CBO staff understand how they can properly prepare students for a service experience. Effective coordinators also appreciate the uniqueness of their community. They take time to look at the community and understand its strengths and struggles. They consider the community's natural resources and assess the community members and their needs. Starting from this point, coordinators are able to design, support, and initiate appropriate service activities, and have a high probability of being well received and supported.

Coordinators create an environment where students are equal partners in a program. Continually creating situations where students can be involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating energizes a program. This energy is a resource that supports both the students' learning and their commitment to service. Coordinators should also try to take time to reflect and learn. Although reflection for participants is built into the service learning model, it is an essential tool for a coordinator as well. Those who take time to reflect after each activity, event, program, project, and year can learn from their mistakes and successes, and can improve plans for future programming.

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COLLABORATION

Service learning supports teachers and administrators in their effort to work collaboratively with colleagues, CBO staff, community members, and parents, and helps CBO staff become more involved with schools and youth. However, many teachers and CBO staff don't fully understand what collaboration is, and therefore don't see the many benefits it can offer.

Collaborations, like coordinators, come in different forms. The smallest scale is teachers collaborating with other teachers in a single school building, usually by sharing ideas about possible service learning activities. Although this type of collaboration may start small, it can grow into something much larger that includes many teachers and staff members. Different schools can collaborate with each other within a school district. High school students tutoring elementary school students is a typical service learning arrangement at this level. Schools and CBOs can also collaborate with each other, usually by arranging for students to do service in CBOs. Finally, schools or CBOs can collaborate with the community itself, by having students work, for example, with the parks and recreation department, political leaders, or active citizens.

Practices That Promote Collaboration

Although there are many types of collaboration, effective collaborations have a few key elements in common. Perhaps the most important of these is balance; the most effective collaborative relationships strike a balance between their partners. There are a number of practices that can be used to improve and expand the relationships between partner organizations, and thereby strengthen service learning in general.

Collaborative relationships are ongoing. They may change over time. A relationship that is based on a community service program may evolve to facilitate service learning rather than community service. There may also be personnel changes within the partner organizations. Being aware of these possible changes enables collaborators to adapt to them.

Participants should be thoroughly prepared for service. Good preparation enhances collaboration. People have a tendency to want to jump right into the service part of service learning before they are ready, but this will reduce the amount of learning they gain from the experience. Preparing students includes discussing with them the organization's history, mission, and current needs. Service sites and service recipients can also prepare themselves to receive students. They should be aware of why the student is there and what his or her schedule is.

Collaborators should establish clear and frequent communication with one another by alerting each other when problems or concerns arise so that

adjustments can be made. This also means letting each other know about the positive outcomes of endeavors; positive reinforcement can go a long way towards strengthening a collaborative relationship. Effective collaborations give a voice to each partner involved, and include all partners in every aspect of service learning -- preparation, service, reflection, and celebration. Collaborators must also understand each other's needs and expectations. Honest discussions about roles and expectations right at a program's start provide a foundation for collaboration. Schools and CBOs need to know why each party is collaborating and what each partner hopes to gain from the collaboration.

A strong advisory board can support the collaborative process. Although it is possible to have strong collaborations while still having a weak or nonexistent advisory board, it is also a fact that those programs with strong advisory boards almost always form strong collaborations. Some service learning coordinators choose not to form an advisory board because of the effort such an endeavor involves. Others indicate that while it does require a considerable amount of effort, an advisory board is worthwhile for the benefits it can provide. It is important to note, however, that an advisory board does not have to be a large and formal affair to function effectively. It can consist of three people sitting around informally and sharing ideas. In fact, many programs do not have a formal advisory board, but do have people who network on a regular basis. No matter what form it takes, an advisory board lends support to the coordinator and lessens coordinator burn-out.

Collaboration is about community-building; it focuses on sharing. Organizations share time, resources, services, and celebrations. Partners in successful collaborations understand that the collaboration will result in a product. The partnership is a joint effort that will have an impact on the community. When trying to form new partnerships, it is also important to remember that persistence pays. Clearly, collaborations do not always turn out as first envisioned. It often takes a while to work out all the kinks in a collaborative relationship. Sometimes the problems are never smoothed over, and the best-laid plans for collaboration may, for one reason or another, fall through. If this happens, coordinators need to be flexible and try again elsewhere. Sometimes collaborations are formed in unexpected ways.

Collaboration brings people together. Collaborating encourages people to reach beyond their own organizations and build bridges with individuals and groups not previously connected with a school or CBO -- to the benefit of all involved. Collaborations as part of service learning also provide an opportunity for many schools to redefine how they work with youth and parents; these changes can aid both program participants and the organizations themselves. Collaborative efforts can take place at many levels: between two people in the same organization, between national organizations, and everywhere in between.

THE FUTURE OF SERVICE LEARNING

Service learning has emerged at a time when there is a historical need for educational change. It is a powerful and effective teaching methodology, and tends to not only reinforce already existing relationships, but also create new ones; in particular, it reconnects the school to the community and the community to the school. Above all, service learning seeks to structure a partnership between self-esteem and intellectual development that is at the heart of lifelong learning. To be sure, panaceas for K-12 have come and gone; fads have surfaced only to disappear within a year. Is service learning any different? Hopefully, yes, because its focus is broad-based, not singular, and it comes at a time when only broad-based constituencies can restore confidence in public education.

Much has been accomplished. Service learning is no longer an experimental program that questions its viability and acceptance. The impact on the numbers of participants, beneficiaries, and hours in service programs are impressive and absolutely convincing. In addition, service learning is no longer at that beginning stage where "one program fits all," but instead displays a remarkable variety and adaptability to all regions, school levels, disciplines, and even students. Moreover, it exhibits a kind of durability and flexibility over time that is characteristic of all developmental models, and thus suggests that it can display the kind of growth and increasing sophistication that is traditionally expected of academic disciplines and methodologies. Finally, service learning can be recommended as a model of school change and teacher training; the ultimate affirmation of any new effort is the support it imparts to the profession of teaching, the value of learning, and the centrality of the community.

If there is a danger of excessive advocacy for service learning, it is that of *overselling* -- of appearing to sound like a revivalist preacher talking about being born-again. And yet, again and again what evaluations of these programs discover is that classrooms and curricula are reinvested with reality; teachers find special satisfaction in managing, not dominating, the learning process; administrators, for the first time in many years, strut proudly before public groups, school boards, senior citizens, and even city councils, because now schools do not just take but *give back* to the community; citizens previously down on teenagers are often now their biggest boosters; service clubs dominated primarily by the retired and elderly now feel a new excitement about the future through working with young students; and community agencies that are severely underfunded suddenly find a new transfusion of volunteers to work for their understaffed programs. Most importantly, the students themselves frequently experience an emotional and academic growth spurt in one year (often after many years of slumber). One phrase heard again and again from teachers, parents, administrators, and even friends is, "I can't believe this is the same kid."